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Generative Intersections: Supporting Honors through College Composition

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Given the current emphasis on acceleration toward graduation, common sense might seem to argue against First-Year Composition (FYC) as a compelling course offering in an honors curriculum. Many honors students enter college with significant college credit: Advanced Placement and dual enrollment programs allow students to fulfill their first-year college writing requirement and other lower-division requirements before leaving high school. These programs are flourishing. The number of students taking an AP exam in high school has nearly doubled in ten years, with over a million high school graduates taking an AP exam in 2013. That year, 58% of English Language and Composition AP test-takers and 55% of the English Literature and Composition cohort earned a 3 or better on the exam (College Board).

During the same time period, 82% of high schools offered dual enrollment courses, and 93% of the courses with an academic focus awarded college credit immediately upon course completion (National Center for Education

Statistics). Two million students strong, dual enrollment is changing the landscape of students' first two years of college, in many cases affecting their decision about whether to enroll in First-Year Composition.

The deck seems stacked against Honors Composition. However, before passing over the course for a more appealing requirement, we should examine the benefits of the class for the honors student. Annmarie Guzy has recently reviewed some of these merits, citing research that shows a correlation between enrolling in FYC and achieving success in future academic writing. She also shares data indicating that honors students make frequent sentence-level errors, suggesting that they would benefit from additional instruction, and she contends that college writing instruction promotes needed holistic growth in research and writing. In light of these benefits, she argues that first-year students should consider the advantages of enrolling in First-Year Composition before substituting it with an AP score.

Disciplinary activity in the field of writing studies is adding strength to Guzy's stance. Trends in composition teaching are creating intriguing parallels with honors, paving the way for shared goals and unique collaborations. Grammar, citation, library search engines, and thesis statements continue to be important but have also been joined by other aims that align admirably with the commitments of honors. Honors directors and composition faculty would do well to become familiar with their mutual aims, opening the doors for partnerships that support honors students' development as writers and thinkers.

Three disciplinary trends in particular make First-Year Writing a likely candidate for an honors curriculum: the field's increased attentiveness to reading as an area of emphasis, its growing interest in metacognition and learning transfer, and its potential for facilitating digital engagement. Taken together, these characteristics suggest that the first-year writing course deserves a second look.

CONVERGENCE #1: STRATEGIC READING PRACTICES

Historically, reading has held a privileged position in the honors curriculum. Ted Humphrey notes that "the early practitioners of honors education regarded it primarily as a kind of subject matter, that is, as a classically based education in the Great Books, organized either historically or topically" (16). At some institutions, this emphasis continues to hold sway; many honors courses take as their centerpiece "rigorously classical masterpiece reading

lists,” functioning as “the only place a student who is not a classics major might encounter Homer or Sophocles” (Schuman 2006).

Alongside this tradition, however, a range of other pedagogical approaches have emerged, with the focus shifting to features like independent research, community involvement, self-reflection, cross-disciplinary integration, and experiential learning. On the surface, this evolution may seem to have demoted reading from its pedestal; however, a closer look reveals that reading remains central to the activities of the honors student. Undertaking a weighty research project; synthesizing the traditions of multiple disciplines; navigating the policies and procedures of a community organization: all require reading versatility and comprehension. Even the City as Text™ curriculum, with its emphasis on reading place over textbook, begins with the written word: participants are assigned “introductory material to read before meeting in order to ground the issues in some way” (Machonis 147), and a new NCHC monograph focuses on the crucial role of reading and writing throughout the experiential process (Long).

Strong reading skills, then, continue to be essential for the honors student. To be prepared for their honors courses, students need to have strategies for persevering through complex ideas, disciplinary conventions, dissonant perspectives, and challenging vocabulary. They need to have the tools for navigating unfamiliar genres and the facility to identify claims, evaluate reasons and evidence, and respond to the ideas of others. First-Year Composition, with its renewed interest in reading, is one site for this learning to occur.

Nationwide, composition directors have signaled their interest in reading in the Writing Program Administrators’ *WPA Outcome Statement for First-Year Composition*. Developed by a national professional organization of composition directors, this document describes the key skills that students should develop in their introductory writing courses. In the statement, reading—described as facilitating “inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating”—is placed alongside critical thinking and writing as a central skill. At my own institution, reading appears explicitly or implicitly in multiple FYC objectives. By the end of ENG 101, students should be able to:

- view texts through a rhetorical lens, using concepts like audience, purpose, context, medium, and design to evaluate an author’s discursive choices;
- explore texts as genres, identifying key features of specific text types to aid them in new writing situations;

- analyze the claims, evidence, and reasoning in academic and non-academic texts;
- recognize similarities and differences between authors' stances and be able to synthesize their points of view;
- assess the credibility and suitability of sources they have gathered and understand the content sufficiently to use them as the basis for a research project.

The assumptions underlying these goals are shared by many composition programs today: namely, that students benefit from having a range of reading tools and guided experience with difficult texts in multiple genres to become strong writers. Stated plainly, writing teachers are interested in nurturing flexible and savvy readers. Composition and honors directors should work together to identify these kinds of shared reading goals, partnering in the task of facilitating students' reading competency.

CONVERGENCE #2: SELF-SUFFICIENT LEARNING

"Collect, select, reflect" may well be the unofficial motto of the honors program at my institution, where crafting an e-folio is a central occupation of the honors student. The e-folio's reach is significant, informing course design and student activity. Honors director Christopher Corley stresses to new honors faculty that every honors course should yield a potential contribution to students' e-folios; students are expected to amass learning artifacts each semester ("collect") and to identify those that most clearly demonstrate their progress through the honors program's competencies ("select"). This assembly process, however, is insufficient; every experience must be probed. A commonplace of the honors program is that experience is richer when paired with reflection. Honors students are routinely asked to engage in self-assessment, monitoring and recording their growth as leaders, researchers, and global citizens. The e-folio is the site where this reflection is on display: students must show not only that they have achieved but that, through reflection, they understand the meaning of their achievement.

The MSU Honors Program is not alone in embracing metacognition as a key practice. Many honors programs are incorporating reflection into their program outcomes and actualizing it through learning portfolios (see Appendix A in Corley and Zubizarreta for some examples). Folio advocate John Zubizarreta has aptly described the motive behind the movement: portfolios

help students understand the learning process, enabling them to recognize what, when, and how they have learned and to articulate why this learning matters. Portfolios also help honors students connect learning experiences across disparate environments, constructing their activities into “a coherent, unified developmental process” (124). Zubizarreta characterizes this bridge-building as the “[linchpin] of lifelong, active learning” (124). In general, the goal of reflective portfolios is to teach students habits of mind that might power future self-directed learning.

Such habits of mind have caught the attention of composition instructors as well. Historically, writing teachers have set their sights on the future, generally embracing the preparatory responsibility of English 101, yet recent scholarship suggests a more concerted effort to ready students for subsequent writing endeavors. Composition teachers are designing writing-oriented research projects that are informed by research on learning transfer by educational psychologists; through these projects, teachers are exploring what students do with the knowledge and skills gleaned in first-year writing and how tailored instruction might aid in future applications. This research focus was adopted in a 2011–13 scholarly project entitled “Writing and the Question of Transfer,” hosted by Elon University with collaborators from over thirty universities; it was taken up again in the 2012 Special Issue of *Composition Forum* on the theme “Writing and Transfer”; and it was featured multiple times on the program for the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication, the flagship conference of the field, in panels like “Teaching for Transfer,” “First-Year Composition and the Quest for Transferability,” and “Transfer and Transformation.”

In short, the conversation on learning transfer is going strong. One conclusion that has been drawn thus far is that students benefit from pedagogies that employ not just action but also reflection to instill cross-context application. A popular approach involves teaching generalizable concepts, providing opportunities for students to apply these concepts in multiple contexts, and cementing these concepts in students’ problem-solving repertoire through metacognition. The last step is key: researchers from the Elon Institute assert that reflection “often plays a key role in transfer, and reflective writing promotes preparation for transfer and transfer-focused thinking” (4). They suggest “[assigning] activities that foster the development of [students’] metacognitive awareness” and “explicitly modeling transfer-focused thinking and the application of metacognitive awareness as a conscious and explicit part of a process of learning” (5). To maximize the benefit that

students receive from their courses, composition teachers are heeding such recommendations, experimenting with contemplative teaching practices that promote learning transfer.

A shared interest in boosting the takeaway from their courses/programs, then, has led composition faculty and honors directors to reflection as a key practice. Their common investment in this activity positions them well to collaborate on honors outcomes and curricula that nurture the lifelong learner.

CONVERGENCE #3: ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Honors students typically come to college with a rich extracurricular background. Whether through sports, music, clubs, student government, community service, or other means, honors students have usually sought out multiple opportunities to be involved. Honors programs strengthen this participatory bent, stressing engagement in local and global communities. Service learning requirements and study abroad programs, both common features of honors programs, encourage students to adopt an outward orientation, to stretch themselves through interaction with and assistance to others. At my institution, a leadership requirement further nurtures this habit; students participate with others through planning, organizing, and directing organizations and activities. They enroll in honors courses like Leadership in Context, Growing the Leader in You, and Developing your Mentor Philosophy, and they are invited to participate in Leaders of Tomorrow, a community-based leadership program. At the end of their degree programs, they must showcase their contributions to the campus and/or community and include an overarching leadership philosophy in their e-folio.

Preparing students to engage and lead, then, is a central goal of our honors program, and it is an explicit or implicit aim of honors programs across virtually all college settings. One component of this preparation particularly relevant to the composition classroom is training as writers. In many situations, students' ability to lead effectively will hinge on their ability to produce effective prose. Writing's universal importance may account for NCHC's decision to list "developing written communication skills" as the first of five objectives that most honors courses should strive to achieve (National Collegiate Honors Council). First-Year Composition can help instill this writing competence.

Increasingly, though, writing proficiency is a necessary but insufficient facet of effective communication. As Claire Lutkewitte observes, "Old and new technologies have enabled, and even demanded, the use of more than

one mode to communicate, entertain, solve problems, and engage in deliberation” (2). New channels for communication have evolved and risen in stature as digital exchange has become the norm. This shift has exerted pressure on composition specialists to think differently about their work. “The contemporary difference,” according to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), “is the ease with which we can combine words, images, sound, color, animation, video, and styles of print in projects so that they are part of our everyday lives. . . . The techniques of acquiring, organizing, evaluating, and creatively using multimodal information should become an increasingly important component of the English/Language Arts classroom.”

In digital environments and beyond, the sophisticated rhetor is the individual who can coordinate modes of composing, capitalizing on the unique opportunities they afford to create an accessible and cohesive message. Composition teachers have been retooling to be able to support students’ multi-faceted rhetorical development; in the last fifteen years, multimodal teaching practices have gained prominence, with a swell of scholarship exploring the theoretical and practical dimensions of designing and assessing new media projects. Advocates of multimodal teaching stress that “in personal, civic, and professional discourse, alphabetic, visual, and aural works are not luxuries but essential components of knowing” (NCTE). What once may have seemed like icing on the cake has now become a necessary communicative tool. Multimodal composition teachers also assert that writing students apply themselves more and learn more when they have opportunities for varied rhetorical decision-making and for greater creativity.

The multimodal movement has the potential to augment honors programs’ emphasis on participation and engagement by helping students learn to compose effectively in digital environments. Composition teachers could partner with honors directors to re-envision the e-portfolio, for instance, and could help honors programs determine what forms of instruction and support would be necessary to achieve the desired product. Working together, composition teachers and honors directors can help students sharpen their contributions to the world—on paper and the screen.

CONCLUSION

While the pressure to accelerate progress to graduation threatens to erase composition from the honors program map, activity in writing studies is building a new case for its presence in the curriculum. A closer look reveals that composition and honors share more interests and commitments

than one might initially assume. It behooves both parties to explore these common interests and to discover anew how composition might enrich honors education.

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